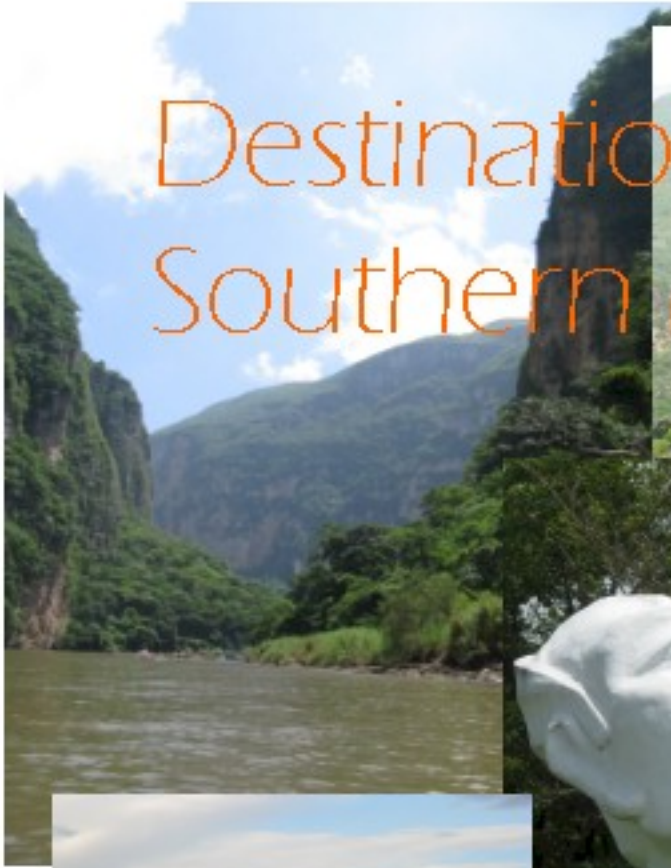


Destination: Southern Mexico



Destination: Southern Mexico
Paula Farthing, Connersville Middle School
Foreign Language Exploration
Topic: Culture, Climate, Geography, and History in Southern Mexico
Grade Level: 5–9
Length: 2–4 weeks

Destination: Southern Mexico develops a student journal via a brief daily “warm-up” exercise. The unit introduces a brief visual “warm-up” for students with the chance for teachers to integrate a writing prompt to acquaint students with the daily life, customs, traditions, environment, and climate in southern Mexico. *Destination: Southern Mexico* focuses on the events experienced by Fulbright participants during their thirty days in southern Mexico.

The unit includes: a Map of southern Mexico utilized by Fulbright participants during the summer of 2009; Unit Plan; Teacher Information; and 4 accompanying PowerPoint Presentations (available for download at this Web site:

<http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/etext/llilas/outreach/fulbright09/>).

The PowerPoints are divided into sixty-one events/sites.

Each day, students will be immersed in the culture of southern Mexico via a series of photographs. They will be instructed to make the virtual trip by examining the pictures; evaluating the information; and creating a diary of their observations. Teachers are encouraged to preview the photographs each day and initiate a focus question that correlates to their curriculum or the lessons they are teaching. Educators can choose to view one event each day or choose multiple events on any given day. There are sixty-one events in the Teacher Information and PowerPoint presentations. Therefore, if teachers use one event per day, the unit will be completed in twelve weeks.

Teachers may customize which slides they show each day by choosing *Slide Show* in the Menu Bar. In the pull down menu bar, click on *Custom Shows*. For each group of slides you want to create, choose *New*. From this menu, you can choose the slides you would

like to view on that day. I have organized them into one event per day; however, I have left them in large groups so each teacher can customize their presentation(s).

Foreign language teachers utilizing this unit may choose to have students create their diary/travel journal in the target language. Teachers may adapt the requirements in the journal to reflect student ability. Students may also develop a geographical awareness of southern Mexico as they travel across southern Mexico via their student journal. In order to initiate this process, have students locate the site on a map. A basic map of the journey across southern Mexico has also been provided. Teachers may choose to incorporate more detailed maps of Quintana Roo, Campeche, Chiapas, Oaxaca, Puebla, Tabasco, and the Federal District. The Teacher Information provides basic information regarding the event. In addition, many of the events have a Web site listed for further details on the site or event visited by Fulbright participants.

After students complete the warm-up entry in their journal, teachers may elaborate and expand on the observations students made by sharing the information provided in the Teacher Information. Following the explanation, students should be encouraged to share/discuss how their reactions to the events and the photographs were similar and/or different than the explanations provided. When students have additional questions, they should be encouraged to research to find the answers to their queries. They might also be interested in locating additional pictures or maps to supplement their journals.

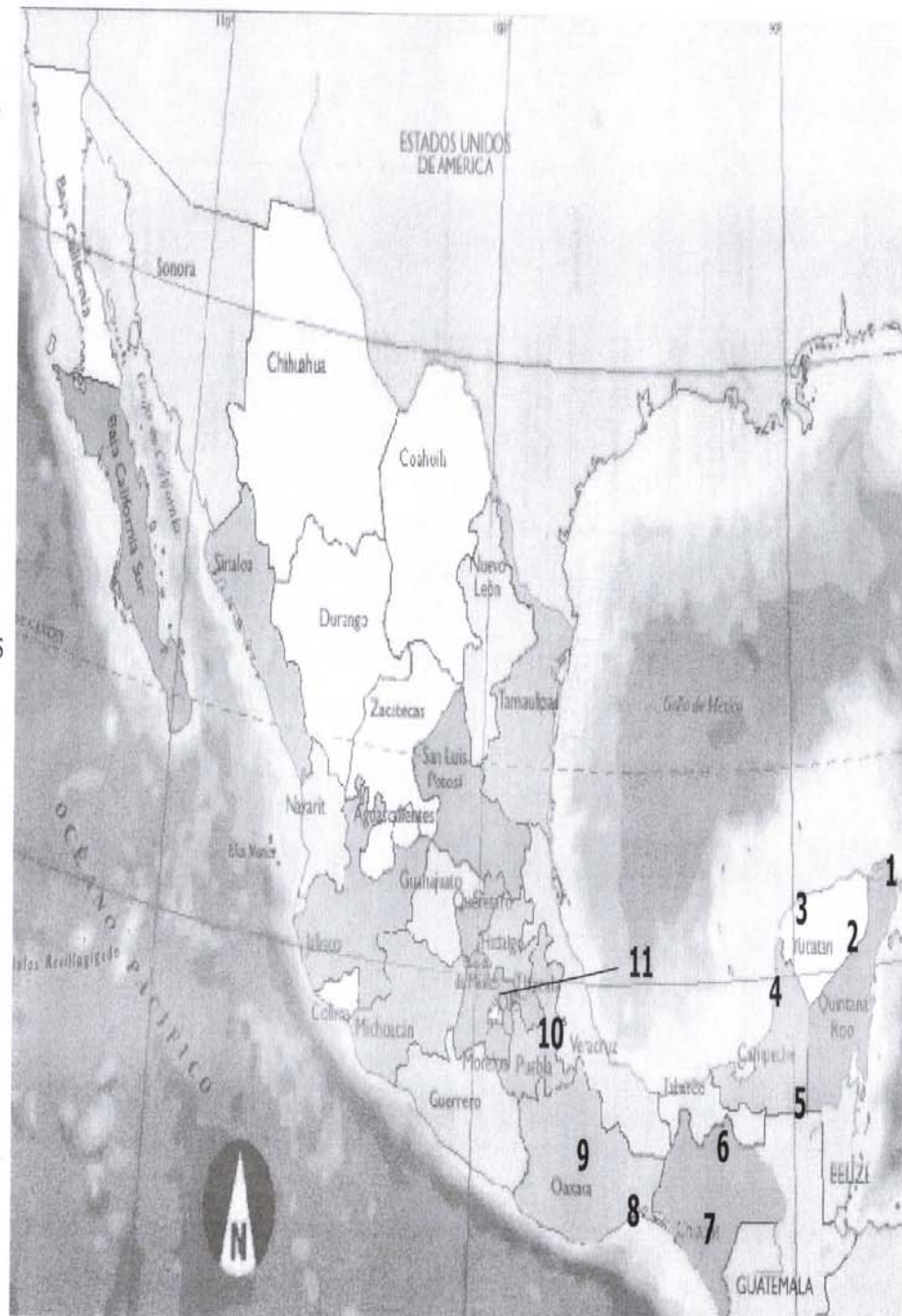
At the end of the unit, students will have completed a travel diary which has taken them “Down the Roads of Southern Mexico.” This journey should provide them with greater knowledge and appreciation for the culture of southern Mexico while improving their geographical awareness.

As a culminating activity, teachers are encouraged to allow students the opportunity to create their own cover for the diary. This cover should reflect the culture of Mexico and a personal interpretation of the events they “witnessed” along the way.

FULBRIGHT-HAYS SUMMER SEMINAR 2009

"Down the Roads of Southern Mexico: History, Traditions and Modern Challenges"

1. Cancún, Quintana Roo
2. Valladolid, Yucatán
3. Mérida, Yucatán
4. Campeche, Campeche
5. Calakmul, Campeche
6. Palenque, Chiapas
7. San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas
8. Juchitán, Oaxaca
9. Oaxaca, Oaxaca
10. Puebla, Puebla
11. Mexico City, D. F.



Unit Plan

Destination: Southern Mexico

Established Goal(s):

Standard 4 CULTURES: Develop awareness of other cultures

- 8.4.1 Investigate and report on basic social practices of the target culture.
- 8.4.2 Examine products, perspectives, and symbols of the target cultures through guided participation.
- 8.4.3 Examine factors that influence practices, products, and perspectives.
- 8.4.4 Describe contributions from other cultures.

Standard 6 CONNECTIONS: Access and connect information through media.

- 8.6.1 Use digital media and/or other culturally authentic resources to build vocabulary, improve reading ability, and encourage cultural awareness.
- 8.6.2 Use digital media and/or other culturally authentic resources to study target cultures.

Standard 7 COMPARISONS: Investigate the nature of language and/or culture.

- 8.7.7 Compare the social patterns of other cultures and the learner's own culture.

Standard 8 COMMUNITIES: Become an active global citizen by experiencing languages and cultures in multiple settings.

- 8.8.3 Show evidence of becoming a life-long learner by using the target language and/or cultural knowledge for personal enrichment.

Understanding(s):

- Learners examine, experience, and reflect on the relationships among the practices, products, and perspectives of the culture.
- Learners strengthen language proficiency and cultural knowledge by using current digital media and authentic resources.
- Learners understand the nature of language and/or culture through comparisons of the language and/or culture studied and their own.

- Learners will use their knowledge of the target language and/or cultures within and beyond the school setting for personal enrichment and/or civic engagement.

Essential Question(s):

- What items, practices, beliefs, and activities are unique to culture in southern Mexico (e.g., religious celebrations, holidays, symbols, products, etc.)?
- What factors influence the practices, perspectives, and products found in southern Mexico (religion, climate, environment, history, government/politics, etc.)?
- What contributions have the people of southern Mexico made in art, music, architecture, science, fashion, medicine, literature, etc.?
- How does your day-to-day life compare to people in southern Mexico (food, transportation, education, shopping, homes, climate and weather, transportation, agriculture, etc.)?

Learning Activities:

Students will develop a travel journal via a brief daily “warm-up” exercise. The unit introduces a “warm-up” opportunity for students with the chance for teachers to integrate writing into the curriculum. Each day, students will be immersed in the culture of southern Mexico via a series of photographs. They will be instructed to make the trip by examining the pictures; evaluating the information; and creating a diary of their observations.

A general map will give educators the opportunity to locate the event before beginning the daily activity. More detailed maps of each area can be found at www.wiki.com. At the beginning of each PowerPoint event, teachers may want to provide a focus question that relates to their curriculum or unit of study. After students complete the warm-up entry, teachers may elaborate and expand on the observations students made by sharing information provided in the unit. Following the explanation, students should be encouraged to share/discuss how their reactions to and personal perspectives on the photos/events were similar and/or different than the ones provided. Encourage students to

empathize with the people of southern Mexico and apply prior knowledge and information to improve their attempts to interpret the photographs. When students have additional questions, they should be encouraged to research to find the answers to their queries.

Performance Task(s) and Other Evidence:

At the end of the unit of study, students will submit their completed journal as evidence of their learning. These journals will be evidence of their increased experience with Mexican culture and geography.

As a classroom teacher, you may choose to critique the journal as a writing tool wherein you must choose the criteria and establish a rubric for scoring the work. Some of the elements you may consider include: creativity, length, understanding, grammar, punctuation, and interpretation. If you have required students to create the journal in the target language, teachers must also evaluate student competency and command of the language. Students may also illustrate their journals. Many students will be able to reproduce the concepts they have learned through drawings, and utilizing art to reinforce the writing will complement learning for kinesthetic learners. An artistic element can only enhance the final project.

In addition, teachers may choose to have students create original journals from scratch; purchase the journals independently or supply them to maintain consistency among the students.

TEACHER INFORMATION

PART 1: CANCÚN TO CALAKMUL

CANCUN

The first documentation of our journey across southern Mexico began on the beach in Cancún. We experienced gentle breezes and the warm pleasant waters of the Caribbean Sea. Palm trees waved and the water was crystal clear. The sea appeared aquamarine at a distance. Cancún was a bit of paradise. Many people spoke English and the local people catered to our every need.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cancun>

http://www.cancuncare.com/Cancun_Weather/

CECYTE

The next stop on our trip was a local technical school, CECYTE. WOW! What an experience! The school welcomed us with open arms. We were greeted, entertained, and fed by the teachers and students. The entertainment included singing by CECYTE students and local native dancers in costume. The dancers were very talented.

The campus was neat and clean. Our visit took place when most students were on break; however, many of the teachers were available to answer questions and discuss their curriculum. Pictures of the library revealed limited holdings and students were not permitted to check out books overnight. We also visited their heating and air conditioning lab and computer lab. Although the curricular resources were sparse, students and teachers were still very excited about their facility.

CECYTE serves as a secondary school that focuses on training students to enter the many service industries located in the area in and around Cancún. Students learn English and focus on trades relating to the tourist trade. Heating and air conditioning, small engine repair, culinary arts, computers, and technology are only a few of the educational options available to CECYTE students. As seen in the pictures, students wore uniforms to school. We also learned that the students could attend early sessions (early morning to early afternoon) or late sessions (early afternoon to early evening).

In Mexico, a basic education is preschool, primary school, and lower secondary school. Mexican preschool, for children between the ages of three and five, is usually free and is not mandatory, but is strongly encouraged. All children are required to attend primary school beginning at age six. Following primary school, all students must attend three years of lower-secondary education between the ages of 12 and 16. Upper secondary education is not mandatory and requires students to complete a lower secondary certificate before admission. CECYTE is a school offering an upper secondary education that will train students for professional positions in the workforce. Graduates leave the

school trained as Professional Technicians, Technical Professionals, or Basic-Level Technicians. Students at CECYTE may also choose to earn a technological *bachillerato* that will prepare them to continue on and receive higher education.

http://www.ed.gov/offices/OUS/PES/int_mexico.html

VALLADOLID

Following the visit to CECYTE, we departed for the quaint little town of Valladolid. Our hotel in Valladolid had a courtyard with a pool and dining facilities. We arrived early enough to do a little exploring in town. Our ventures took us to a local Catholic church where parents and students were preparing for primary school graduation. Our group meandered through a few shops and then we set out for the oldest ecclesiastical building in the Yucatán. The narrow sidewalks and streets along the way gave us our first look at a typical Mayan home and the use of bicycles to transport food, people, and other items of importance. The Monastery of Saint Bernardino de Siena was holding services as we arrived. It is called “Sisal” by the locals and was reportedly built in 1552.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valladolid,_Yucat%C3%A1n

<http://www.luxuriousmexico.com/wwwluxuriousmexico/Luxurious%20Mexico/Products/EnglishProducts/YucatanValladolid.html>

CENOTE ZACI

Our next visit was to a cenote not far from the center of Valladolid. A cenote is a large sinkhole. These sink holes are quite common in the Yucatán and are used by the local people as a source of fresh water and as a recreation spot for swimming. There was a walkway encircling the cenote and a swimming rope strung from one side to the other. Our group did not venture into the water, but we enjoyed the cooler temperature of the underground haven. The cenote had many properties of a cave, including stalactites and stalagmites. We were also told the cenote contained fish without eyes. This was a great spot to stop.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6hpWBslxsX8&feature=related>

<http://www.panoramio.com/photo/27514289>

<http://yucatanoday.com/en/topics/seven-best-cenotes-yucatan>

EK BALAM

Ek Balam was the first of many archaeological sites we were scheduled to visit and this is also the place where I climbed my first Mayan ruin. The name of this site means “black jaguar.” The more than forty structures include defensive walls, a ball court, temple, and plaza area. The focal point is the Acropolis. It was fascinating to see and difficult to

climb. The steps were very steep and the view from the top was expansive. Our guide explained that originally there were two sets of steps to represent the forked tongue of a serpent. However, a later ruler built rooms atop one of the sets of steps.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ek%27_Balam

CHICHÉN ITZÁ

Our next stop was Chichén Itzá. Recently, Chichén Itzá has been awarded the status of being a Man-Made Wonder of the World. This title has caused the local authorities to limit interaction at Chichén Itzá so we could not climb to the top of this ruin. One of the most profound discoveries to date at Chichén Itzá is the observatory/temple with a jaguar at the top and the Mayan “ball” court.

Just as a side note: Many commented in our group that there is a tree around many of the ruins that smells like chicken soup. When we asked the tour guide what was the scent, he replied, “That is the wood of the red cedar you smell!” Strange smell for a cedar tree!

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chichen_Itza

MÉRIDA

We then moved on to the city of Mérida. Mérida was built on the site of a Mayan “city of five hills.” For this reason, Mérida is often considered the location of the oldest continually occupied city in the Americas. Mérida has a beautiful square in the middle of town with the government buildings located on two sides and a cathedral on another. The first evening, we walked to a restaurant which boasted the name of Frida Kahlo (the artist). Inside were several portraits of her and copies of her work. On the way back to the hotel, we stopped along the square and enjoyed coconut ice cream (a local favorite).

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M%C3%A9rida,_Yucat%C3%A1n

SECONDARY SCHOOL IN MÉRIDA

The next morning, we went to visit a group of teachers from a variety of Mérida schools. Most of the teachers spoke English. Once again, school was not in session, which afforded us the opportunity to tour the campus. Most of the buildings were located around a central courtyard. Some of the buildings had large murals revealing excerpts of Mexico’s history. Although these were beautiful, we again found the facilities severely lacking. The auditorium was little more than desks with arms located on platform steps. Each classroom was a hodge-podge of desks and the library was largely inadequate. Most revealing was the small cabinet in each classroom that held the teacher’s resources. The resources included some paper, a few notebooks, chalk, and a few lesson outlines. We also learned that the classes are held in shifts. Some students report early, around 6:00 a.m. These students leave around noon. Other students do not arrive until afternoon and their classes run until early evening. It is not uncommon for teachers to work both

shifts. These shifts are sometimes at different buildings and require extensive travel. This travel uses up any down time the teacher may have in the middle of the day to eat or relax. This schedule made me thankful for the 10–12 hour days I sometimes spend in my own classroom.

Before we departed, the teachers offered us a copy of the national curriculum for teaching English and a backpack. Our group felt very welcome and many of us exchanged e-mails and addresses to continue our U.S.-Mexican educational connection.

http://www.ed.gov/offices/OUS/PES/int_mexico.html

AMERICAN CONSUL

This visit was followed by lunch at Príncipe Totol-Xiuh, a restaurant famous for local Yucatán cuisine. The food was fantastic and we were honored to meet our American Consul in Mérida, Karen Martin, during lunch.

CONCIERTO DE GALA

Mrs. Martin hosted our group for a concert that evening. The concert was in her honor because she was being recalled to the United States in less than two weeks. The concert was held in the beautiful Teatro Peón Contreras. The theater was built in the early 1900s and the architecture was heavily influenced by its Italian architects. Teatro Peón boasted a main staircase made of Carrara marble, and beautiful frescoes painted on the dome.

During the performance, over 100 school children sang, along with opera singer Carla Dirilkov. They presented American music: jazz, folksongs, a hymn (Amazing Grace), and finally, The Star Spangled Banner. It was a great way for a group of American teachers/tourists to spend the 4th of July. Ironically, I don't think I've ever felt more patriotic.

Dinner on the 4th was at Los Alimendros (The Almonds). This restaurant was mentioned in many of the travel books. It is here that I tested the drink "Jamaica" (pronounced Hamy-ka). Jamaica is a tea made from the hibiscus flower. It was great compared to the other local favorite, spinach water.

<http://www.panoramio.com/photo/57026>

CELESTÚN

On July 5th, we were given the option of shopping in Mérida or visiting the estuary at Celestún. I chose Celestún and it was a great choice. The bus took us to a sleepy little fishing town with colorful buildings and music playing when we got off the bus. The group walked down a winding street to the waterfront where our tour director rented two boats. We took a crazy boat ride along the Gulf of Mexico and saw huge flocks of flamingos and other water fowl. After visiting the flamingo nesting area, we wound

through a mangrove forest and stopped at a petrified forest. Next, our guide stopped at the location of a fresh water spring that flowed into the estuary. The boat ride was followed by lunch at a restaurant on the beach. When we asked about fresh coconut milk, the waiter climbed the tree next to the restaurant and cut down the coconut to provide one for each of us! Lunch was fresh fried crab—AMAZING! We were all reluctant to return to the hotel.

Along the route back to Mérida, the tour director had the bus go down the main street which boasted fabulous old buildings created during Mérida's colonial period. Most of the homes were built by the fortunes of sisal plantation owners or merchants.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celest%C3%BAn>

BECAL

Our next stop was the village of Becal. Becal is famous for creating straw hats from the *jipi* (pronounced hippie) tree inside underground caves. Caves provide the necessary humidity to keep the *jipi* (probably *jipijapa*) straw from breaking. The bus dropped us off on the town square where *bicitaxis* (bicycle taxis) were waiting on us. The bicycle taxis took us to the caves where the hats were made. An old man demonstrated how the hats were made. Many of the hats take two to three days to make. Unfortunately, I did not buy any hats because the only way to tell if they are the correct size is to try them on. Since I am not a “hat person,” I did not purchase one.

We returned to the bus via *bicitaxi*. Before departing from Becal, several ladies lined up in front of the hat monument in the center of town to get a quick photo.

CAMPECHE

Campeche is noted for its beautiful seaside promenade, the fortified walls of the city, the brightly colored downtown buildings, and an extraordinary cathedral. This fishing community is also famous for its seafood. Although the city is historic and very well preserved, it is also quite a draw for international tourism. Therefore, it was easy to find a WALMART, McDonald’s, Sam’s Club, and Blockbuster Video. On a quick trip to WALMART we felt immersed in Mexico’s **real** middle class. It was odd to feel like the minority in a place so common at home.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Campeche>, [Campeche](#)

<http://www.frommers.com/destinations/campeche/A33585.html>

CHINÁ

Next, the group met to depart for the small country village of Chiná and the archaeological site, Edzná. We stopped at Chiná to see the local church and library. I also took lots of “field watching” pictures because farming is so very different in Mexico. It was astonishing to see corn grow alongside orange groves. Needless to say, the corn didn’t look great and I found the cattle tethered to poles quite amusing.

EDZNÁ

At Edzná, we had our first real adventure. Once again we climbed the ruins and were amazed at the extent of this ancient city. As we had witnessed before, Edzná had been a walled city with entrance gates. The site also contained a ball field just as the other Mayan ruin sites had. However, this was the first time I remember seeing the remains of cleansing “spas” or a stage for musical performances. I was also impressed with the priests’ bedroom and the water retention system.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edzna>

XPICOB

On July 8, we had a TERRIFIC day. It started at the Xpicob Fish Farm with the release of a rehabbed turtle. We were first introduced to the aquatic animals that live there. The local habitat included a manta ray, sea cucumbers, sting ray, sea turtles, and puff fish. In addition to our group, a large number of five- and six-year old school students were also visiting. Our mission for the day was to release the sea turtle which had been rehabilitated by the staff at Xpicob. The staff ferried all of us to the release location which was a deck attached to a sand bar about a half mile off shore. Located on the sand bar was a dock where the children were already waiting. Our group got to handle the turtle, play with the children, and swim for about two hours. This was truly a once in a lifetime opportunity!

SABANCUY

After Xpicob, we headed for a beach located halfway between Campeche and Calakmul. The beach was called Sabancuy. The bus stopped and we had a view of the most incredible stretch of beach you have ever seen. It was uninhabited except for a few homes and the restaurant where we ordered lunch. After ordering lunch, we went for a swim. It didn't matter to any of us that lunch in Mexico ALWAYS takes a long time! Just before our lunch arrived, the sky clouded up and it became a torrential downpour (while we ate lunch). It was the rainy season in Mexico and it usually rains about every other day. The rain wasn't a problem at Sabancuy, because it was the epitome of an "extended lunch."

http://www.campeche.ca/sabancuy_campeche.htm

CALAKMUL

We reached our destination, the Biosphere Reserve at Calakmul, shortly before dark. Our visit to Calakmul included visiting some of the most beautiful Mayan ruins we had experienced thus far. They were nestled in the tree tops of the jungle and were only found by a pilot who was flying over the territory and noticed a significant difference in the local elevation. It wasn't a hill: he had located the temples of Calakmul! Calakmul has more ancient ruins than any other site in Mexico. Aerial photographs and archaeologists have located more than 6,250 locations (many of which have not been revealed).

Calakmul also was full of jungle wildlife. They say jaguars are common—and we thought we had evidence of them! Several trees in and around our huts had large gash marks about four or five feet off the ground. Many of us imagined that this was a good way for jaguars to sharpen their claws. One of our members finally found the courage to ask the tough question: What caused these gashes? Once again, the guide gave us a rational explanation. He told us that the slashes were used to harvest sap (gum) from the chiclet tree. Boy, were we mistaken!

In regards to nature, however, we did see iguanas, toucans, and several families of howling monkeys at Calakmul. Once again, I have terrific photos from the top of the temples. And.....trust me the climb to the top wasn't easy. The temperatures were still upper 90s and nearly 100% humidity. Walking, climbing, and just breathing in this environment was really tough. And, oh, by the way, did I mention the BUGS?

<http://www.mayanbeachgarden.com/Calakmul.html>

PART 2: BIOSPHERE RESERVE TO ZINACANTÁN WEAVERS

BIOSPHERE RESERVE

The next morning at Calakmul Biosphere Reserve did not turn out to be our best adventure. We set out for a flora and fauna walk, but it seems that the plants and animals didn't like the heat and humidity any better than we did. We saw a few things....butterflies, scorpions, termites, worms, birds, and lizards. All of us heard and saw more mosquitoes than anything else. I have the bug bites to prove it!

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calakmul_Biosphere_Reserve

CHAH-KAH

Late in the afternoon, we arrived in Palenque to find a wonderful resort village, Chah-Kah, complete with three swimming pools that formed a lagoon between the huts and the restaurant. It was easy to relax here because the atmosphere was tropical and would remind you of Hawaii.

Chah-Kah has a legend about two Mayan lovers, Itzá and Yum, who were not allowed to marry because they were not the same class. Their love is represented by the two trees growing on opposite sides of the river. The trees lean into each other above the water. It is a great story and a lovely resort.

PALENQUE JUNGLE

On July 12, we set out for Palenque. The first part of our visit to Palenque included a jungle walk. Along the walk, we learned about the cocoa and turista trees. Cocoa was very important because it was used to trade for jade from Guatemala. Jade was used by the wealthy to create adornments in their teeth and to make funeral masks. The turista tree is named for tourists because it turns red and the bark peels. The tree also is a cure for diarrhea. We also saw large red cedar trees and red fire ants. The howling monkeys also made an appearance at Palenque.

PALENQUE

Palenque was the Mayan "City of the Dead." It is unlike other Mayan cities because it has a burial ground with ceremonial temples. The Mayan elite who lived here believed in satisfying the gods with blood. The blood was provided through ritual, monthly self-mutilation. Both men and women were required to make this sacrifice by using the thorns of a tree found in the central plaza. Women pierced their tongues and men cut their private parts on a monthly basis.

The Mayans who lived there were, however, highly sophisticated people. They had an aqueduct system for fresh water, saunas for cleansing, inside toilets, and they developed

the use of a highly accurate calendar. These people believed that they would have five “lives” and that the last life ends on December 22, 2012. They believed that on that date, the earth will align with several other planets causing unusual stress on the earth which will in turn set off volcanoes worldwide. Their calendars ended on this date.

Palenque was the home of the Red Queen and her son, Pakal. Both of these leaders were described as having very white skin (perhaps albino). Pakal was also very tall (almost six feet tall). This factor, combined with his very white skin, has caused many to theorize that he was an “alien” or, at the very least, a foreigner. In an effort to remain in power, Pakal married his sister and they produced a six-fingered son who retained the throne after Pakal died at age 81. When these leaders died, their servants were sacrificed and buried with them.

The Red Queen was buried with her jewels. The tomb was booby-trapped for grave robbers by the Mayans. The jewels were located beneath the queen’s sarcophagus on a bed of mercury. When the jewels were removed, the looters breathed in the mercury fumes and became poisoned. Pakal’s tomb included an ornate jade mask that remains the property of the Mexican government today and is on exhibit at the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palenque>

CHIAPAS

The next item on the agenda was to take my Dramamine. The road to Agua Azul was noted for its hairpin curves and steep, mountain passes. I took many pictures along the way. I wanted to document the corn growing on steep mountain hillsides in clumps of three or four plants. Corn is still the most important crop for local farmers. In many places it is only subsistence farming. The locals do not have fertilizer and the crop struggles to survive. Larger fields (at lower elevations) utilize combines for harvesting. However, harvesting is generally done by hand with a machete at higher elevations.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chiapas>

<http://www.travelchiapas.com/map/map-2.php>

<http://www.answers.com/topic/chiapas>

AGUA AZUL

Agua Azul means Blue Water and the fresh water falls at this location made my birthday on July 13 even better. We were higher in the mountains and the humidity was lower than we had seen in days. At Agua Azul, we found a series of waterfalls. At the base of the falls, many children played in the cool waters flowing down from the mountains.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DYOrGbHbHXI>

TONINÁ

Our afternoon on July 13 was spent in Toniná. Toniná was the highest (in elevation) of the Mayan ruins that we visited. We also learned that it was also called the “Spartans” of the Mayans. Toniná was known for its competitive spirit and this city was a fierce rival with Palenque. When the bus arrived at Toniná, we had two options to get to the isolated ruins: walk or ride a horse. The decision was easy because they only had two horses to rent! We walked far off the beaten path past a farm with cows and horses. When we finally got to the ruins, they were fantastic. Unlike the other pyramids we have seen, these Mayans smartly used the existing mountainside as a base for their structures. This eliminated half the work! I was also surprised to find corn and squash growing on the sides of the pyramid. In addition to vegetables, cactus grew along the top of the pyramids.

This pyramid had seven levels. I scaled six of the seven levels where the view was absolutely incredible, but the altitude made climbing difficult. I did go high enough to see the queen’s throne. Unlike other sites, we saw many indigenous people at this pyramid. Some were sweeping and picking up. Others carried large machetes and appeared to be preparing to harvest corn.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tonina>

CHIAPAS DE CORZO

We set out on the road again traveling from Chiapas to Juchitán, Oaxaca. The scenery was fabulous. The ride took us along the mountain ridges (probably where former paths and trails ran). The panoramic views were beyond belief! As we got higher and higher into the mountains, we moved ABOVE the clouds.

I could have taken a picture every time I looked out the window. The small villages each had distinct personalities. The biggest complaint I had was speed bumps. When we were not on a federal highway, we encountered a speed bump every one to two miles. This was very inconvenient, especially when the bus was crawling up the side of a mountain. However, the local people also utilized these speed bumps to harass bus drivers and tourists. Along the way, we began to see many indigenous people standing or sitting along the road to sell their handmade goods to tourists. It was common for groups of women, families, and even children to stand in the middle of the road to hawk their wares. The indigenous people would offer hand made goods and produce to travelers. They did not take “no” for an answer easily and often became agitated when the bus did not stop or tourists refused to buy their products.

When we arrived in Chiapas de Corzo, we were amazed by the statue utilizing local lacquer techniques. The influence of Spanish architecture was also obvious on the *zócalo* where we found a brick bell tower and a gazebo shaped like the Spanish crown.

In Chiapas de Corzo, we had a fabulous lunch in a wonderful Yucatán restaurant with marimba entertainment. The lunch was a buffet. It included roast, barbecued pig, fiesta soup (chicken broth, boiled eggs, tortillas and plantains), and a fresh shrimp salad with onions, tomatoes, and cilantro. The finishing touch was a local honey *licór* produced for consumption only at this restaurant. The restaurant had interesting exhibits of the many varieties of beans and peppers used in the local cuisine.

We also spent time shopping in this quaint little village. We wandered through the shops located around the town square and were fascinated by the use of lacquer and the brightly painted pottery. We returned to the bus, carrying shopping bags with arts and crafts or clothing made by the indigenous people of the area.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chiapa_de_Corzo,_Chiapas

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chiapas>

SUMIDERO CANYON

Our next adventure took us to the riverfront. At the river, the tour director rented a boat and we took off down the Grijalva River. This river winds through the magnificent Sumidero Canyon. Traveling along this river was like being on the Colorado River inside the Grand Canyon. The cliffs were as steep as the Grand Canyon, but made of limestone. In some places the face of the cliffs rose over 6,000 meters and the water was over 200 meters deep in many places. The biggest difference between the Grand Canyon and Sumidero was the vegetation. The cliffs were usually covered with full-grown trees.

We were also lucky enough to see a lot of different birds and animals. The area is famous for white egrets and brown pelicans. The cliffs were also home to families of monkeys and there was a cave full of bats. Scariest of all, we saw more than a dozen alligators of various sizes sunning along the banks of the river.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sumidero_Canyon

MARIMBAS IN CHIAPAS

Following the boat ride, we went exploring as a group along the streets of Chiapas de Corzo. Two of our members were music teachers, therefore, our tour leader was looking for a family he had heard of that not only played marimbas, but also created them. Finally, we found the address we were looking for. An elderly woman answered the door. It was obvious that we were unexpected, but we were welcomed nonetheless. Our entire troupe trudged into the old woman's home. When we got to the back of the house, it opened onto a large open area overlooking the river. This area appeared to be a workshop that housed both finished and unfinished marimbas.

In this area, Mr. Nandayapas greeted us and explained how marimbas were made. He explained that marimbas are related to both the piano and the xylophone. The marimba is

a wooden version of the xylophone and most marimbas have both black and white keys from a piano (except they are the integrated). He demonstrated how the keys and mallets were made. His shop had several completed marimbas and he explained how marimbas differ from country to county and artisan to artisan. After he had completed his explanation, he asked if we would like to see his woodworking shop.

Beneath the balcony was a workshop. In the workshop, we found numerous workers and several pieces of equipment specifically designed to manufacture marimbas. Several of Mr Nandayapas's employees demonstrated their craft. Thomas showed us how to create a beautiful carved leg. Another man designed the sound boxes that go beneath the keys and still another was piecing together the hand-made wood inlays that decorated the marimbas. Mr. Nandayapas told us that the marimbas were made of flexible *hormiguillo* wood and the art of creating marimbas had been passed down from his father and grandfather. The patterns had been in his family for over 100 years. It was fascinating.

After our demonstration in the wood shop, he asked if we would return to the balcony area where he and his brothers had created a "surprise" for us. When we got back to the balcony, Mr. Nandayapas introduced us to his two brothers. In our absence, chairs had been arranged and a marimba set up transforming the balcony into a concert area. We found out that Mr. Nandayapas and his brothers not only manufactured and shipped marimbas around the world, they were also considered some of the greatest marimba players in the world. They have played not only in Mexico and South America, but they have also traveled to South America, Europe, Canada, and the United States. They have even played at Carnegie Hall! Needless to say, the performance they gave for us was unbelievable. The Spanish tunes were familiar ones, including Cielito Lindo. Our group left the Nandayapas home with the feeling that his statement "The marimba is considered the soul of Chiapas" was astonishingly true.

SERGIO CASTRO

In the evening, we met in the hotel lobby and walked to Sergio Castro's Museum of Traditional Clothing of the Indigenous People of Chiapas. Castro is known as the Saint of San Cristóbal because of his medical work with the indigenous people. He is specifically known for his work with burn victims. If you have not seen his video on YouTube, check it out.

As he explains in the video, many of the local people suffer from trichinosis. They get this disease from eating undercooked pork. One of the major symptoms of this disease is convulsions. These convulsions come on without warning and cause the people to collapse and appear as if they are having an epileptic seizure. Since most homes have an open fire in the middle of their home for heating and cooking, they frequently fall into the fire at the onset of their convulsions. This problem is even more serious when nobody is around to get them immediately out of the fire. Castro has been working with the people in this area since he first arrived as an agricultural specialist in the 1960s. His museum of

traditional clothing is one way he can share his knowledge of the local people and raise funds for his lifesaving work.

Castro informed us that the official language of Chiapas is Spanish, however, within the state of Chiapas there are seven different local language groups. This cultural diversity and the effort of the people to hold on their identity are witnessed in the demographics of Mexico. More than 30% of Mexico's population is considered "native" and belongs to an indigenous group. Some of these groups have large populations and allow their members to inter-marry. Others like one Mayan group have dwindled to only 600 members and restrict marriage to only Mayan members. This restriction has limited the gene pool and resulted in a large number of birth defects among this group.

In the Museum of Traditional Clothing, Castro introduced us to everyday clothing, formal wear, and ceremonial dress outfits. He also asked us to share a nip of *posh* (a traditional native moonshine). Each of the different language groups exhibited very different clothing. One of the most unusual items was a white woven bridal dress decorated with rabbit fur, white chicken feathers, and bright colorful cross-stitch. Another unique item was a hair piece made of a parrot beak and feathers. Even today, this item is given to a bride by her groom. From that time on, she will wear it in her hair, thus identifying her as a married woman in her culture.

We also enjoyed Castro's story of the white tunics worn by one culture. He explained that the men who were married wore pants and the single men did not so young women could examine their "goods." As he said, "You wouldn't buy a tomato without checking it out, would you?" Women in this culture want to know what they are getting before they "buy" it. Another culture's ceremonial costume looked like Napoleonic coats. However, their hats were cone shaped and covered with monkey skin. Shamans in yet another tribe wore tunics made of tree bark. These light-colored coverings were decorated with a large, red circle on each breast representing the sun and moon. Stars (red polka dots) covered the remainder of the tunic.

Power and leadership in many of the indigenous tribes was represented by a stick or a rosary. The majority of cultures sported ribbons on men's (not women's) hats. The most consistent clothing decoration, however, was embroidery. Some clothing sported cross-stitch. Others had crewel, long-stitch, or brocade, but every item had handiwork and an incredible amount of detail. The cloth used in these costumes was also hand woven so each article took days, if not weeks, to complete. As Sergio Castro explained to us, time is of no importance to these people. If it takes two days or two months to make, it does not matter.

Castro also shared slides of the local people and the situations in which they would wear most of the clothing. We were able to see a "bull dance," elections, and weddings. Castro discussed the incorporation of native whiskey and Coca-Cola in syncretic religious, cleansing ceremonies. On the way out of Sergio Castro's facility, we were given the opportunity to make a donation to support the work he performs among the indigenous people of Chiapas.

<http://sergiocastrosc.blogspot.com/>

MAYAN MEDICINE

We began our official day by hailing taxis to take us to the Center for Mayan Medicine. The center was a working facility with a healer on staff and they would normally treat 10–15 patients daily. At the center we learned of the syncretic connection between the Catholic religion and Mayan beliefs. The Mayans believe in healers. There are five roles of healers. They are:

1. Pulsador (l'lol) heals through the pulse;
2. Rezador de los ceros (k'oponej witz) heals through prayer;
3. Huesero (tzac'bak) cures by whistling and use of band-aids, addresses fractures and broken bones;
4. Partera (jvelt'ome), a mid-wife who takes care of women through pregnancy and babies following the birth; and
5. Hierboro (ac'vomolo) heals through herbs.

According to the information made available at the Center for Mayan Medicine, healers commonly use items such as raw eggs and basil to cure ailments. Patients must supply their own products when requesting services. Mayan healers have three areas that they can cure: enemies, arguments, and jealousy or envy. Each ailment requires specific candles to get rid of the affliction.

In addition, the midwives use a machete, soft drinks, and a hen to expedite the delivery of a baby. Labor and delivery is completed with the woman on her hands and knees. After the baby is born, the midwife completes a ceremonial bath in raw egg. New mothers are advised not to eat avocados or onions. Reportedly, avocados cause the genitals of male infants to swell and onions will cause the baby to have colic.

The Center of Mayan Medicine allowed us to visit the botanical gardens where they grew plants and herbs to use as medicine for their patients. Before departing the Center, we were given the opportunity to visit the on-site pharmacy. The pharmacist listened to individual concerns and offered remedies for each ailment. Members of the group purchased natural medicine for congestion, itchy eyes, swelling feet, achy bones, and sunburn.

http://www.medicinamaya.org/i_mayan%20medicine.html

TALLER DE LENATEROS

On our way back to the hotel, we stopped at a paper making store, Taller de Lenateros. The owner gave us a tour of the facility and shared the stages of paper making. He showed us how to manufacture the pulp; bleach the pulp; dye the product; dry, stamp, and press the paper. His work was beautiful and he exhibited a wide variety of uses for the paper manufactured in his shop. He had a wonderful supply of paper products and a nice gift shop with cards, scrapbooks, and journals.

<http://www.mexicoartshow.com/lenateros.html>

SAN CRISTÓBAL FESTIVAL

As we began to move outside the paper shop, we heard sirens and cheering. We saw what appeared to be a parade. There were several trucks with balloons and local people dressed in native costumes. In the back of one of the trucks was a statue (St. Cristóbal) from one of the local churches accompanied by several pots of burning incense.

In our efforts to document this event with our cameras, we failed to notice the old man who was beckoning us to join them. Finally, one of our group picked up on the signal and we all went inside the house where the gentlemen had just carried St. Cristóbal. Inside the home, we witnessed a celebration. The celebration was in honor of the founding of the city. St. Cristóbal is the patron saint of San Cristóbal de las Casas. This festival was scheduled to continue for the next nine days. As the local people explained, nine days before the festival begins, the saint is removed from the church and is transported from one house to another for each of the nine days before the festival begins. We were just lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time in order to see the first ceremony. Each day the ceremony is accompanied with fireworks and pageantry until the last, big day of the festival.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Cristobal_de_las_Casas

CHAMULA

The next morning, Chip Morris met us at the hotel to escort us to the village of Chamula. Chamula is famous for its weaving, market, and bizarre religious practices. We spent much of the morning walking around the village and perusing the items for sale in the market. We visited two families of weavers and discussed the rapid growth of the village. The culmination of our visit was entering the local church. No photographs are permitted in the church. The church, San Juan Chamula, was an interesting experience. The floor was covered with pine needles and a fog of intense incense floated throughout the building. The tile floor had a variety of candles burning in nearly every open space. Patron saints lined the walls and people were everywhere singing, chanting, or praying. Many of the participants were using Coca-Cola or *posh* for their ceremonies. With Chip as our guide, we were invited to share *posh* with the elders inside the church. On this day, we did not see any chickens sacrificed, but we did notice chicken feathers and blood in a couple places.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chamula>

ZINACANTÁN WEAVERS

Back on the bus, we were transported to a Zinacantán village. Chip accompanied us and he had us stop at the home/shop of one of his friends who happened to be a local weaving family. Three sisters and their mother produced the items in the shop. There were hundreds of blouses, scarves, shawls, bedspreads, table runners, and other items. While we were shopping, the mother began preparing tortillas and invited all of us to sit and eat in her home. We sat on chairs about 12 inches high to stay below the smoke of the open hearth where she was cooking the tortillas. Her daughters prepared beans, cheese, tomatoes, onions, chiles, and guacamole to complete the meal. The meal was delicious and very authentic!

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zinacantan>

PART 3: JUCHITÁN MARKET TO OAXACA CHURCHES

JUCHITÁN MARKET

Juchitán is a working city with a huge downtown market. We visited the market on the first evening and you could find almost anything you wanted. Here is a list of some of the things we saw: live, shackled, pre-plucked chickens; cooked iguana; gauze skirts; wooden saddles; gold jewelry; shoes of every variety; home made chocolate chunks; an assortment of fruits; *huipils* (native blouses for the women of Oaxaca); home grown tonics and elixirs; scarves, piñatas, banana leaves (to cook tamales in); chunks of local cheese; and more flies than you could ever imagine.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juchit%C3%A1n,_Oaxaca

JUCHITÁN WEDDING

On our second day in Juchitán, we were lucky enough to stumble upon a church where wedding ceremonies were being performed. It was a fantastic sight to see the men dressed in their *guayaberas* and women in their *huipils*. They took photos outside and allowed us to document the event, while they waited on a mariachi band to arrive. When the mariachi band arrived, they led the happy couple and their wedding guests to a party in their honor. Since it was Saturday, we soon realized the church was scheduling weddings back to back. As soon as one ceremony was over, another ceremony began. It was definitely interesting to see.

JUCHITÁN COTTAGE CRAFTS

The next stop was to visit a local artisan who makes the traditional *huipils*. *Huipils* are traditional dress for Oaxacans. It is black velvet with an intricate embroidery pattern on the bodice, and is accompanied by a matching skirt. We enjoyed watching her embroider and playing with her two small children. Our Juchitán guide, Luisa, next took us into a local home where a young man was creating a hammock. He weaved as we watched. In the courtyard, the grandmother watched his baby while his wife prepared the local version of tortillas, *totopo*. *Totopo* is different because it has several holes pressed into the corn meal dough to make it remain flat and get crispy. Many ovens have spikes in the top where the women place the raw dough. When the *totopo* is finished, it will fall to the bottom of the oven.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huipil>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Totopo>

PLAYA DEL CANGREJO

On Sunday, we were scheduled to swim in the local estuary. However, after several members of the group expressed concern over the unsanitary conditions of the local fresh water supply, our tour director developed an alternative plan. The drive to Playa del Cangrejo was only about an hour and much more appealing than swimming in the local estuary. You also couldn't beat the view. As we got close to the beach we went past

(almost over) the port town of Salina Cruz. This town was Mexico's largest port on the panhandle. Salina Cruz means Salt Cross. It was noted for its ability to harvest salt from the sea and it was also a major exporter of Mexican oil.

Our afternoon at the beach was wonderful. We played in the cool, powerful waves of the Pacific Ocean; walked along the salty, sand beaches; snoozed in the over-sized hammocks; and enjoyed whole grilled fish for lunch. After lunch, two local Muxhe thought we should learn some Mexican games. Therefore, they taught us a Mexican version of hopscotch which they called "airplane." Before departure back to Juchitán, we had a dialogue with the two Muxhes and they explained their lifestyles and culture.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muxhe>

HIERVE EL AGUA

After we departed Juchitán for Oaxaca, we took a detour to visit a local spot called Herve el Agua. This site was way off the beaten path. In fact, the bus driver had a great deal of difficulty navigating down the narrow dirt road. When we arrived, we found several rundown shacks where food was being prepared and we indulged in a late lunch.

Then, it was time to "go over the cliff." The trek down to the pools was steep and rocky, but beautiful. It was like being in the middle of a picture post card. When I first caught a glimpse of the upper pool, it looked like a wading pool on the edge of a cliff. Next, I could see the rock and mineral formation draped off the side of a mountain. This formation looked like a frozen waterfall.

The water in the pool originated from several cracks in the side of the mountain. It formed pools where local people and tourists flocked to experience the visual ambiance of swimming at the edge of the earth.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herve_el_Agua

OAXACA MARKET

We arrived in Oaxaca (meaning place of the gourds), Oaxaca, in time for Guelaguetza festival week (but we missed the five-hour parade). The crowds were endless, but everyone enjoyed the party atmosphere in Oaxaca. After we checked into the Hostel la Noria, we headed to the town square for dinner and a look at the local wares. The market in Oaxaca is extensive and the town square has a wrought iron gazebo. We listened to marimbas as we enjoyed our dinner.

The next day, we spent a large portion of the day at the market. We saw a variety of products including chile salt worms, fresh breads, Mexican candy, thread, handicrafts, fresh seafood, *mole*, dried fish, *gusanos de maguey*, pigs' feet, tripe, sheep liver, whole chickens, chocolate, and fried grasshoppers.

I didn't want to miss this opportunity to taste fried grasshoppers and freshly ground chocolate. Therefore, when a vendor offered the grasshoppers, I took a sample. The fried grasshoppers had a consistency of a crab shell, but they tasted like a mixture of lime, salt, and red pepper. All in all, they weren't too bad.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oaxaca>, [Oaxaca](#)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oaxaca>

OAXACA CHOCOLATE

Next, our tour director took us to the chocolate store. In this store, they hulled the cocoa pods and removed the beans; roasted the beans like coffee; ground them once on their own and then multiple times after that to insert vanilla or cinnamon. It was kind of crazy, you see the beans go into the grinder and then warm chocolate comes pouring out at the bottom. We learned that Mexican chocolate is not nearly as fattening as chocolate in the U.S. because it uses only simple ingredients and no fat. Some people might not care for the mixture, but I think it is wonderful as hot chocolate.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3E07Bv0Ehyk>

OAXACA ART

The next day was our chance to venture out on our own independently in Oaxaca. Almost immediately we began to notice the connection between Oaxacan art and Mexico's Day of the Dead celebration. We saw many skeletons in various clothing and dress. One skeleton, La Catrina, looks all dressed up. La Catrina is a very popular Day of the Dead image because it's aimed at the rich. The message is that no matter how rich you are, you will end up the same as everyone else. Masks in every shape and size were apparent in Oaxaca and colors continued to be vibrant and used as a source of expression.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Day_of_the_Dead

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Calavera_Catrina

MEZCAL

The next morning, we boarded the bus and headed out of Oaxaca to visit a mezcal distillery and a village famous for its rugs and tapestries. We took a short tour of the distillery where we found that the major difference between tequila and mezcal is the type of cactus from which each are made. Mezcal is made from the green, spiked agave and tequila is made from blue agave. We were educated on the entire process: collecting the hearts of the plant, roasting the cactus, smoking the cooked hearts, grinding the fruit (with a horse drawn press), fermenting the product, distilling the mezcal, and then bottling. We even learned why they put a worm in the bottom. Supposedly, the worm they insert is the same worm that feeds on the agave plant, therefore, they put the worm in the bottle to return some of the flavor back into the distilled alcohol.

During the tour, we were given roasted agave to sample. It was delicious. The distillery produced and bottled a variety of products including: new mezcal, mezcal that had been aged 5–8 months, aged mezcal (2 years), walnut mezcal, blackberry mezcal, piña colada mezcal, coconut mezcal, and strawberry mezcal.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mezcal>

SANTA MARIA TEOTITLÁN

On our way to the Zapotec village, we stopped at Santa Maria Teotitlán. Santa Maria Teotitlán was unique because stones from the original Mayan ruin were incorporated in the building of the church. The church had carved stones set in the white painted church walls. The effect was striking. In back of the church, the church rose above evidence of the remaining Mayan wall.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teotitl%C3%A1n_del_Valle

ZAPOTEC WEAVERS

Our next stop was Teotitlán, a Zapotec village famous for weaving rugs and tapestries. There were any number of shops we could have stopped at, but our guide chose the Mayan Women's Cooperative. When we arrived, we saw a demonstration on how to prepare the wool and spin the wool into thread. Next, we saw how different plants are used to create the dyes. The Mayan women explained that there is one plant they call the magic plant. You pound its green leaves, place them in water, and the water turns red. This red tinted water then turns their wool BLUE! It was magic. Oddly enough, fresh crushed pomegranate seeds turn the wool a wonderful turquoise. Other plants they routinely used were yellow marigolds and tree bark. Another big surprise was the tiny gray shells of bugs, called cochineal, that fed on the local prickly pear cactus. When the gray shells were crushed, they turned into a fine red powder. It was crazy! You can see cochineal in use at Teotihuacán, where one of the palaces still retains its red color. The women even extended their lesson by showing us how to create subtle shades within the same color family. Variations were made by adding lemon, lime, or other acids to the mixture.

After the fabric lesson, the women showed us how to use their loom to create fantastic patterns and designs. Many Mayan women make traditional patterns and others choose to create new ideas of their own. We also learned what many of the patterns meant and how to interpret what we saw. Their work lined the walls of the compound where they were located. It was beautiful. Our lessons were followed by lunch. The women served the entire group. Our first course was soup and tortillas. The soup was a broth with very large chunks of squash; a piece of corn on the cob; and a bunch of greens (much like mustard). The second course included frijoles (beans), rice and two kinds of Oaxacan cheese. For dessert, the women provided candied peaches with cream.

Lunch was followed by an explanation of the patterns in each of the rugs hanging along the veranda. It was impossible to leave such wonderful hospitality without purchasing something, so I bought a rug. The rug I bought was a fraction of the price I would have paid back in Oaxaca and the women guaranteed it to last many, many years.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zapotec_peoples

OAXACA CHURCHES

The next day, we set out to explore the local churches at 9:00 a.m. We visited the Cathedral first. There was a mass at the front altar. We stayed for a little while and took pictures. The dome was beautiful and I was fascinated by the images in the windows of the door. The frosted panes of glass reflected sunlight and made the images on them almost ghostly. Each pane contained a different prophet, biblical character, or saint.

After that, we ambled to Santo Domingo. The stained glass windows inside Santo Domingo were simple, yet elegant.

The last church we visited was San Juan de Dios. The wooden benches and bright colors in the church were cheerful. The most visited and interesting altar in San Juan de Dios contained a Black Christ.

<http://oaxaca-travel.com/guide/cultural.php?getdoc=true&lang=us&doc=home§ion=cultural&activo=10.03.02.19>

PART 4: GUELAGUETZA FESTIVAL TO CHAPULTEPEC CASTLE

GUELAGUETZA FESTIVAL

Originally, we were scheduled to have a free evening on Wednesday, but our plans changed. We were given tickets to a local theater presenting an exhibition for the Guelaguetza festival. According to our information, the five-hour parade we missed on our first day in Oaxaca would have included the dancers and costumes we saw at the theater on Wednesday. It was a fantastic exhibition and interpretation of native folk dance. Everyone enjoyed the event. I took amazing pictures from my front row balcony seat and the only drawback was that I was unable to catch one of the fans, baskets, hats, or other gifts the performers threw into the audience after the closing number. It was a great show!

<http://www.oaxacainfo.com/guelaguetza.htm>

MONTE ALBÁN

On Friday morning, we packed everything up and boarded the bus for Puebla. However, on the way out of town, our tour director thought we needed to see Oaxaca's greatest archaeological site, Monte Albán. Monte Albán means "white mountain" and these pyramids have a fantastic view of the city below. This settlement was estimated to have had a population of over 35,000 and dates back through three historic periods, Olmec then Aztecs and finally, Zapotec. Many of the finds from Monte Albán are located in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monte_Alb%C3%A1n

DELORES PORRAS

There was only one more stop in the village of Atzompa. Atzompa is known for its pottery. We met Delores Porras who initiated the movement to create designs with color in 1975. Today, she is frail and suffering from Parkinson's, but she and her son, Orlando, invited us into their home to see the kiln and pottery. Orlando is in the process of building a second, smaller kiln so he can fire the work more frequently. After visiting Delores, we walked to the local Artisan's Market in Atzompa.

http://www.manos-de-oaxaca.com/jr_atzomp.htm

PUEBLA

As we headed toward Puebla, I felt it necessary to once again thank our bus driver. The landscape in the Sierra Madres was phenomenal, and the driving wasn't easy. One of our participants from the far west commented that even the Rockies cannot compare to this stretch of mountains. I've certainly NEVER seen anything like it. My ears were popping

like crazy and I wanted to take pictures that would show you the height and depth of these mountains and canyons—but it just didn't do justice to the majesty of this range.

It took us two hours longer to get to Puebla than we expected largely due to heavy traffic. Along the way, we passed many farms, fields, and even a snow-capped mountain, but when we arrived in Puebla we found it to be a beautiful and modern city.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puebla>, [Puebla](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puebla)

CHOLULA

We found Cholula was special. Cholula was special because of several things: (1) Cortez conquered this village en route to Tenochtitlán; (2) it is one of the few sights where you can see the multiple layers of pyramids; (3) a beautiful chapel was built by Cortez and crowns the top of the original pyramid; and (4) we were given a tour of not only the outside of this pyramid, but we also were permitted to travel along the archaeological tunnels dug below the surface.

Our tour was led by Professor Catalina Barrientos, from UDLA's Department of Anthropology. She was very interesting and made sure we understood the various murals found along the inner walls of the pyramid. Dr. Barrientos also explained the role of Cortez' concubine, Malinche, in the defeat of the Aztecs.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cholula> [%28Mesoamerican site%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cholula)

CINCO DE MAYO

On our way back to the hotel, we stopped at Ft. Guadalupe. The site of this fort overlooking the city of Puebla was where the famous Cinco de Mayo battle took place. Today, it is a restored fort with plaques and a memorial to those people sacrificed in the battle. Many of the teachers on our tour wanted to see this location because it is covered in their textbooks, however, afterward most of them decided it was a disappointment because the site does not live up to the image of the battle.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Puebla

IPODERAC

The next morning, our group ate a buffet breakfast (delicious) at the hotel and then set off for IPODERAC. IPODERAC is a children's shelter for street children. There are approximately 60 boys who live at IPODERAC. They have three basic rules: no drugs, no alcohol, and no violence. The young men range in ages from 7 to 18. The boys are not forced to stay and may pick up and leave at any time, however, as long as they stay, they must attend school in the morning and work in the afternoon. IPODERAC is a self-supporting facility. They raise money by making cheese. There is a small cheese factory on the premises. The children take care of the goats and milk them daily. They turn the milk over to the factory workers who make and market the finished cheese product. It is

a wonderful source of income for the shelter and tending the goat herd provides the chance for each child to be responsible and develop good work ethics.

The facility included the homes, administrative building, cheese factory, barn, greenhouse, and chapel. IPODERAC served as a self-supporting refuge for the children who reside there in the shadow of an active volcano.

<http://www.shinealight.org/Ipoderac.html>

PUEBLA SITES AND FOOD

Sunday was spent exploring Puebla. I investigated the *zócalo*, the cathedral, Santo Domingo, Church of the Rosary Chapel, tiled buildings, bell towers, and an exhibit of Lucha Libre. In the evening, we were accompanied by the tour director to dinner. At dinner, we experienced some of the local favorites: *gusano de maguey* (fried worms) and *escamoles* (ant eggs). The fried worms left a lot to be desired, however, the *escamoles* were delicious. They were served with guacamole and cilantro on tortilla chips. I liked them so well that I ordered them again before I left Mexico.

MEXICO CITY

On Monday morning we set out for our final destination, Mexico City. It was about two and a half hours from Puebla to Mexico City and the traffic was heavy. We traveled along the high plateau where you could see crops and livestock operations (primarily chicken and hogs). This high plateau is in the center of a ring of mountains (or volcanoes) which have altitudes high enough to keep them snow-capped even in the middle of summer. It was not uncommon to see modern farm equipment working next to plows being pulled by horses. Sometimes the harvesting was completed by a combine, sometimes crops were harvested by hand. It was an odd mix of old and new.

Our next destination was the National Palace. The National Palace was located in the middle of the city and it took us about half an hour to get there by bus. This building is where Mexico's government functions. I was looking forward to seeing Diego Rivera's mural of Mexican culture inside the National Palace. The mural was there, but it was being refurbished and a huge scaffolding covered it from one end to the other. We could see the mural behind the scaffolding, but it just wasn't the same. Luckily, the other murals on the inside of the palace were still available. These murals told the story of Mexico as a nation. They were beautiful and provided a great insight into the most significant events in Mexican history.

We left the National Palace and walked across the square to the Cathedral and the remains of the Aztec palace, Tenochtitlán. The remains of Moctezuma's capital are located adjacent to the National Palace, however, there is little left of the original site because it was razed and most of the stones were used in building the National Palace and the Cathedral. On the street, between the National Palace and the Cathedral, we encountered a Native American recreating an ancient ritual in the street. The ritual

included a native costume, tree branches, incense, and dancing. It was odd to see this kind of activity in the middle of the bustle of a modern city.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mexico_City

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Palace_%28Mexico%29

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tenochtitlan>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diego_Rivera

XOCHIMILCO

Xochimilco is the causeway system in central Mexico City that dates back to the time of the Aztecs. At one time, there were thousand of canals. Today, there are less than 100, but we found much to do aboard the *trajineras*. Once we set out on the festive boats, we were accosted by salesman aboard boats of their own. It was still early morning, but they were anxious to sell Corona, corn on the cob, flowers, *serapes*, scarves, shawls, and other items of local interest. Musicians were also on boats and offering their services. Our group paid to hear a mariachi band and marimba players who bumped up and attached themselves to our boat. As we drifted along the banks of the canals, we saw homes, boats, and a large number of greenhouses full of flowers. Previous visitors to Mexico City also indicated that we should see an island with hundreds of dolls hanging from the trees and we did! It was a lovely morning on the canal.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xochimilco>

VOLADORES DE PAPANTLA

One of our last stops in Mexico was Teotihuacán. When we arrived at the site, we found a group of dancers anxious to perform for us. These dancers, “voladores de Papantla,” were pole dancers. The dancers wore brightly colored costumes and climbed to the very top of high poles. The men attached themselves to harnesses and proceeded to spin from the top of the pole as the rope unwound. They were graceful and beautiful with more courage than I could muster!

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danza_de_los_Voladores_de_Papantla

TEOTIHUACÁN

At Teotihuacán we would find the Pyramids of the Sun and the Moon. Teotihuacán predates the occupation of the Aztecs in the central plateau. When the Aztecs arrived, Teotihuacán had already been abandoned; thus, the Aztecs theorized this was the home of the gods. At the site, we first climbed the Temple of the Feathered Serpent. From the top, there was an excellent view of the plaza and the remaining pyramids. The Pyramid of the Moon was at the opposite end of the archaeological site and we only had one and a half

hours for the whole visit. Therefore, we set out for the Pyramid of the Moon instead of stopping at the Pyramid of the Sun. Everyone said if you can only climb one, climb the Pyramid of the Moon because the view is best from it.

Our group traversed the up and downhill climb along the plaza to get to the Pyramid of the Moon. At the Pyramid, we all climbed. It wasn't easy. The elevation was high, the sun was bright, and the climb was steep, but I made it. The view was once again unbelievable. For a change, I found the descent a little easier because of the handrail provided along the pyramid steps. We headed back down the plaza past the Pyramid of the Sun where part of our group decided they must get to the top. Unbelievably, they made the trip and were back on the bus right on time!

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teotihuacan>

BASÍLICA DE GUADALUPE

The Basílica of Guadalupe is much more important to the people of Mexico than the National Cathedral is to the United States. The Virgin is the one uniting symbol for ALL of Mexico. When we arrived, we could see the original chapel high on the side of the mountain so we set out for the original site first. The route to the top was a set of scenic staircases covered by flower covered arches. I stopped several times along the way to catch my breath and enjoy the view. At the top was a lovely chapel where the original shroud of the Virgin of Guadalupe had been kept. However, daily attendance forced church officials to build a second chapel at the foot of the hill. Soon even this chapel proved insufficient and another facility was built. The path wound around the grounds and into each of these chapels until you reached the huge plaza where over 3.5 million people gather on December 12 each year to recognize the date when the Virgin appeared. This is the location where the Pope visited and it is marked by a statue in his honor.

On the plaza are ancient Aztec symbols, statues of Catholic priests, a clock tower with circular and peal bells. This is also a good location to witness the inability of the local ground to support the massive building structures. The last chapel was built of heavy stone and it leans more than the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Structurally, it is still sound, but I am not sure how long it will stay that way. This is the chapel that holds the statue of Juan Diego (the local Indian who witnessed the appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe). Next to this chapel is the modern facility built to house the shroud of the Virgin. It is a sanctuary capable of servicing several thousand people at a time. As we entered the back of the church, services were being held and communion had just begun. We followed the signs to the Virgin's shroud.

The viewing area beneath the shroud was interesting. A moving walkway was located beneath the shroud. It moved both ways so visitors moved across the area once and then took the walkway back to their original position. Above the walkway was the much photographed shroud of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Other religious relics were located in the hallway before reaching the shrine of the Virgin. This location is considered the heart of the Mexican people and remains a very powerful religious site for the entire population. This was one of the most moving places I visited in Mexico.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basilica_of_Guadalupe

BALLET FOLKLÓRICO

Everyone in our tour group signed up to go to the Ballet Folklórico. Most of us considered it a once in a lifetime opportunity. The Ballet normally has its own theater and stage where it has been performed continuously for the last thirty years. However, the regular stage was under construction and the performance was currently on stage at the small theater at the National Museum of Anthropology. Seating was very close to the stage and it provided a very intimate experience. It began with a powerful, over the top performance recreating an Aztec dance and then continued with amazing excerpts from nearly every area of Mexico. We saw everything from ballads and love stories to recreations of festivals and the Mexican Revolution. The performance lasted nearly two hours and we enjoyed every single minute.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ballet_Folklorico

CHAPULTEPEC CASTLE

Chapultepec Castle is the former residence of the Mexican president. Today it serves as the National History Museum. The route to the entrance wound around the side of the mountain. We boarded a tram to transport us to the top. Originally this castle was built by the Spanish government and the architecture depicted its Spanish influence. It was a gorgeous building overlooking a large park in the center of the city. Mexico's current president resides on the park grounds. We met our guide at the top and spent the remainder of the afternoon boning up on the history of Mexico. It was a beautiful way to synthesize all we had seen in our trek across Mexico.

My trip across southern Mexico gave me the opportunity to witness the rich cultural diversity that makes Mexican culture unique.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chapultepec_Castle